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ASCS BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service

U. S. Department of Agriculture

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AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Legislative Authority: The Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) is authorized in section 7 to 15, 16(a) and 17 of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, approved February 29, 1936, as amended and supplemented, particularly by the Rural Development Act of 1972, and Title X of the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973. Funds for the program are authorized annually by the Congress.

Originally, the ACP offered payments for land use and production adjustments in addition to conservation measures. Since 1944, however, its conservation assistance has been limited to measures which farmers generally would not be likely to carry out to the needed extent without cost-share aid.

As required by the Act, the Secretary of Agriculture reports to the Congress each year on the operation of the program.

Program Purpose: With emphasis on enduring practices, ACP is the principal channel through which the Federal Government shares with farmers and ranchers the cost of carrying out approved soil, water, woodland, and wildlife conservation practices on their land to help maintain the productive capacity of American agriculture.

To strengthen the enduring practices aspect of the program, county ASC committees review with a selected number of farmers their conservation needs, looking toward what the farmers would do without cost-sharing assistance.

In departure from the past, specific practices are not included in the National program. County ASC committees, working with county program development groups, have full authority to develop each county's practices. Counties first identify their conservation needs and then develop the practices, concentrating on enduring conservation, that offer solutions. As in the past, the county programs are to be reviewed and approved by State ASC committees.

Program Activities: Funds for the cost-share use in each program year are allocated to Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation (ASC) State committees on the basis of the conservation needs of the farmlands in the various States, as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture.

The ASC State committees, in turn, allot the funds to farmer-elected ASC county committees, who use them to help local farmers carry out conservation measures on their land. Farmers go to their Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) county office and request cost-sharing for conservation work in advance of performance.

In granting requests, the county committee takes into account the need for each practice on the farm, its benefit to the public, its relative urgency, and the need for cost-sharing to carry it out.

How Program is Developed and Administered

The ACP and its accomplishments are reviewed annually in the light of changing conditions. The annual program at the State and county levels is developed jointly by ASC committees, the Soil Conservation Service, the Forest Service, and in most instances, the Soil and Water Conservation Districts and State Conservation Commissions. These programs are developed also with the counsel of the Cooperative Extension Service, the Farmers Home Administration, State Government conservation departments and commissions, and representatives of local agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Local conservation needs are reflected in the county list of approved ACP practices, including specifications and cost-share rates.

The ACP is administered by ASC State, county and community farmer-committees, working under the general direction of ASCS of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. ASCS State and county offices -- each at its own level of responsibility -- serve as the focal point of the administration of the ACP. The Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service are responsible for providing technical program guidance to ASC committees as well as technical aid to farmers in carrying out conservation practices.

To accomplish the program objective and to assure that the program is tailored to best meet the needs locally, authority is delegated to the County Committee (COC), in consultation with the county program development group, to develop all practices for inclusion in the county program for review by the State program development group and approval by the State Committee (STC).

How to Cooperate

The farmer files a request with the ASC county committee for ACP cost-sharing, before carrying out the practice. He receives a notice from the committee of the extent to which his request has been approved. Define installation specifications which meet technical standards and local needs, must be met if the practices are to qualify for ACP cost-sharing. After the practice is completed, the farmer certifies this to the county office. His cost-shares may be in the form of either cash or a purchase order for a conservation service or material.

If the farmer pays the total cost of establishing the approved practice, he is later reimbursed for the Government's share of the cost.

Under the purchase order plan, a purchase order is issued to the farmer for (1) a conservation material (such as seed, trees, or essential minerals) or (2) a service (such as earthmoving or tree planting) needed by him in carrying out an approved conservation practice. The vendor who furnishes the material or service bills the Government and receives payment for the Government's **share** of the cost. The farmer pays the vendor the difference between the amount the Government pays and the total cost of the material or service used.

The ACP also helps provide required technical service for certain practices through special arrangements with the Soil Conservation Service, the State Forester, the County Agricultural Extension Agent, and others.

Cost-sharing is available either under annual or long-term agreements of 3 to 10 years. Long-term agreements are based on conservation plans of operation developed by the farmer or rancher and the Soil Conservation Service and approved by the local Soil and Water Conservation District.

To meet problems that may involve more than one farmer or rancher, pooling agreements may be entered into by farmers and ranchers to jointly solve the mutual conservation problem.

Scope of Program

The ACP helps farmers solve conservation problems in several broad practice groups. The program is designed to cost-share basically for enduring practices. These are practices primarily to meet definite need to:

- Establish long-lasting protective cover;
- Improve or sustain protective cover;
- Conserve or safely dispose of water;
- Benefit wildlife;
- Establish or improve stands of forest trees;
- Give protection against soil erosion and flood damage;
- And meet special county conservation needs.

Generally, cost-sharing assistance is between 50 to 75 percent of the cost of performing the approved practices. Higher rates are authorized for low income farmers who otherwise would be unable to carry out needed practices.

